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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000069

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS AND DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL SQUARES OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

11. (C) Ministry of Internal Security officials confiscated some Christian children's books from stores in early January. Officials took the action because the books contained pictures of Moses and Noah, and they judged portraits of these figures, who are also prophets in Islam, would offend Muslims. On January 21, the Ministry returned all the books following public condemnation by the Malaysian Council of Churches. In a separate case, the Evangelical Church of Borneo filed a lawsuit after Ministry of Internal Security officials confiscated children's Sunday school books. The books are in the Malay language and use "Allah" when referring to God in contravention of a GOM decision to reserve the term "Allah" for Muslims. Separately, the Internal Security Ministry recently banned 11 books on Islam. While the GOM took corrective action in one instance, institutional mandates and policies based on the preeminent position of Islam will continue to generate controversy in multi-religious Malaysia. End Summary.

Christian Books Confiscated, Returned

12. (U) The Ministry of Internal Security's Publications and Al-Koran Texts Control Department confiscated several Christian children's titles containing pictures of Moses and Noah from bookstores in early January. Ministry officials deemed the pictures were "offensive caricatures of prophets" recognized by Islam. The Malaysian Council of Churches immediately condemned the confiscation. Council Secretary Reverend Herman Shastri stated on January 17 that the government officials have "no right (to confiscate the Christian books) and have over stepped their bounds." Shastri argued that such actions offended the sensitivities of Christians, and he urged the government to take immediate action to stop enforcement officials from undermining inter-religious harmony. On January 21, Deputy Internal Security Minister II Fu Ah Kow announced that the ministry had returned the Christian titles to bookstores. A representative from one of the largest publications companies confirmed to poloff that government authorities returned all confiscated books.

God by any other name

13. (U) In December 2007, leaders from the Evangelical Church of Borneo, in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, filed a lawsuit against Prime Minister Abdullah and the

government for banning the importation of Christian publications using "Allah" when referring to God. This followed the August 2007 seizure at Kuala Lumpur International Airport of a shipment of Christian children's books destined for Sunday school programs in Sabah. Deputy Internal Security Minister Johari Baharom justified the action by saying only Muslims could use the term "Allah" (to describe God) as "it is a Muslim word." He added that we cannot let other religions "use it because it will confuse the people." Minister Abdullah Mohammed Zin, responsible within in the Prime Minister's Department for religious affairs, backed Johari's comments, referring to a 1986 Cabinet decision that reserved the name "Allah" and several other Arabic terms for the exclusive use of Muslims.

14. (U) In their suit, church officials are seeking a declaration that they have the constitutional right to use the word "Allah" in all their religious publications and practices, and not just within the church. They claim that the GOM failed to take into account that Malay language-speaking Christians had used "Allah" in printed Malay language materials since 1629. Church officials also seek a court ruling against any faith having exclusive right to the use of any word. A magistrate's initial hearing of the case on January 29 failed to set any date for further action before the court.

15. (U) Separately, the Internal Security Ministry banned 11 books about Islam in a decision finalized on January 17 under the Printing Presses and Publications Act, according to media reports. Officials found that the books deviated from state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. Eight of the books are English language texts from U.S. publishers, while three are Malay language texts. During 2007, the Ministry banned a total of 85 books of various subjects because of religious or

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sexual content, according to Embassy records.

Comment

16. (C) Government machinery set up to uphold the state-approved interpretation of Islam and protect Muslim sensitivities has again generated controversy in Malaysia's substantial non-Malay/non-Muslim community. The number of books seized may be limited, but the symbolism and precedent of officials confiscating Christian children's books are nevertheless damaging to inter-faith relations. The Internal Security Ministry's quick about-face in one highly publicized case suggests that some senior leaders recognize the risks to religious and ethnic harmony. Institutional mandates and policies based on the preeminent position of Islam remain firmly in place, however, and we can expect further controversies of this sort in multi-religious Malaysia.

KEITH